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ABSTRACT

A growing body of literature is questioning whether existing models of human development apply equally to men and women. Prevailing theories of human development have been criticized for being based on research with primarily male subjects of similar ethnic, racial, or class backgrounds. Some research supports the viewpoint that women have different ways of thinking and learning. However, emphasizing the "differentness" of women raises the danger of stereotyping and/or perpetuating traditional sex roles. Others argue that identifying the "different voices" of women may have the positive result of validating other perspectives. If educational institutions are based on a model of one type of thought (rational, analytic), then those whose ways of thinking are more subjective or inductive may feel alienated in the learning environment. Several ways of using knowledge of developmental differences to support adult learning have been identified. The approaches that have been suggested for enhancing women's "different" ways of developing are remarkably similar to the central principles of adult education: teaching and learning that are collaborative and reflective, social action and social change, and validation and use of the life experiences adults bring to the classroom in the teaching/learning process. (Contains 14 references.) (MN)

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Women, Human Development, and Learning

by Sandra Kerka

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Do men and women speak in different voices? Are differences between men and women inborn (sex specific) or environmentally conditioned (gender related)? The theories and models of human development form an important basis for the practice of adult education. However, a growing body of literature is questioning whether existing models apply equally to men and women, and the origins of developmental differences are hotly debated. This *Digest* looks at what some say are women's "different voices" and at others who disagree with this concept. ("Voice" is defined as a sense of self and how one makes meaning of the world [Belenky et al. 1986].) It concludes with suggestions for teaching and learning based on broader perspectives of human development.

Hearing Other Voices?

Prevailing theories of human development have been criticized for being based on research with primarily male subjects, often of a single ethnic, racial, or class background. Caffarella (1992) points to the work of Gilligan, Belenky et al., and others who have identified the lack of female perspectives in these theories. These authors propose that women have different ways of growing and knowing, generally characterized as follows. For women, identity is linked to relationships, connection with others, and intimacy rather than being a separate, self-defined individual. They prefer cooperation rather than competition. Moral decisions are based on an ethic of caring (emphasizing context and relationships) rather than an ethic of justice (reciprocity, fairness, and rules) (Liddell et al. 1993). Caffarella's (1992) review of both traditional and alternative models of female development found the following themes: relationships are the core of women's self-concept, identity and intimacy are issues of prime importance, and women's development usually does not follow the linear patterns supposed to be typical of males.

Some research supports this viewpoint. Kazemek (1989) identified in literature a male and female morality: The male, based on objectivity, results in judgment, rules, and hierarchies of values; the female, grounded in relationships, results in concern for and responsibility to others. When Liddell et al. (1993) tested Gilligan's justice/caring ethic, they found that women scored higher on the ethic of care but there were no gender differences on the ethic of justice. In Rosener's study of female executives (Noble 1993), men's preferred leadership style was "command and control"; women preferred to work interactively, sharing power and information.

Caffarella (1992) notes that "these observations are not generalizable to all women and perhaps not even to many women" (p. 20). One reason, she concludes, is problems with the designs, methods, and populations of the studies. She advocates (1) expanding women-only samples in terms of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level; (2) enlarging the repertoire of qualitative and quantitative techniques; (3) using other theoretical perspectives such as feminist theory and critical theory; and (4) testing theories, models, and themes attributed to women's development with men-only or mixed samples to determine how they apply to all people. She also notes that women of different age groups experience different expectations, resulting in little agreement as to what constitutes maturity for women.

Concerns, Cautions, and Contraindications

A number of people have raised other issues about emphasizing the "differentness" of women. A primary concern is the danger of stereotyping, of perpetuating traditional sex roles. "People often take a leap from recognizing a difference to judging it...as an indication of deficiency" (Noble 1993, p. 6). Another concern relates to the question of whether apparent differences in psychological characteristics and responses are innately related to sex or whether they arise from the different ways men and women experience reality in their particular time, place, and culture. Defining gender as the psychological, social, and cultural features frequently associated with the biological categories of male and female, Cook (1993) states that the sexes are socialized to different attitudes toward achievement and relationships; because of these attitudes and social norms men and women experience different opportunities and expectations. Feminist critiques (Hayes 1989; Tisdell 1993) stress that socialization, unequal access to power, and educational systems predominantly based on the objective, linear, analytical type of thought typically associated with males have a number of effects: devaluing of emotions and relationships and lack of confidence and self-esteem in women.

Tisdell (1993) notes that men are generally socialized for leadership roles and an authoritative style, women to support and to take care of people. Social conventions define and approve what is "normal" and "natural" for each gender and then consistently devalue what is associated with the feminine (Collard and Stalker 1991). For example, Enns (1991) finds that traditional personality theories associate a "healthy" identity with dominant western cultural norms of achievement, individualism, success, and self-sufficiency, traits usually given masculine labels. However, the new models she reviews (such as Gilligan's relationship model and Belenky et al.'s "ways of knowing") can also be used to reinforce gender stereotypes, and they focus on changing the individual rather than the sociocultural context in which identity develops. Blundell (1993) also cautions that the idea of sex role expectations exaggerates the importance of individual attitudes and minimizes the economic and social forces to which individuals respond.

Bar-Yam (1991) argues strongly for the influence of social/cultural factors on psychological differences. Her study of how men and women make meaning of their world and experiences found no sex differences in the evolution of identity. The need to be distinct and the need to be attached contributed equally to development in both genders. For both women and men, the balance shifts between autonomy and interdependence, differentiation and integration. She suggests that the tendency to stay at one end of the scale or the other may be more related to social expectations, life experiences, and cultural values than to sex.

A positive contribution of the identification of "different voices" may be the validation of other perspectives. A more complete self-definition and picture of personality development for both genders would value both knowing through abstract reasoning and knowing through insights from experience, both moral action and moral thought (Kazemek 1989), both connectedness and independence.

Teaching and Learning: Blending All the Voices

If educational institutions are based on a model of one type of thought (rational, analytic), then those whose ways of thinking are more subjective or inductive may feel alienated in the learning environment. Women are asked "to learn the experiences of men and accept them as representative of all human experience" (Gallos 1992, p. 5). The "adversarial logic" of argument and counterargument that dominates many classrooms is foreign to many people's preferred learning styles (Collard and Stalker 1991; Gallos 1992), and academic learning is often separated from life experience, with the result that even highly competent, confident women experience self-doubt (Gallos 1992). Pearson (1992) suggests identifying students' individual learning style preferences and designing environments that allow for diversity of temperament, style, and culture, that balance challenge with support and build on students' strengths.

According to Belenky et al. (1986), some people are "separate" knowers, those who can approach knowledge objectively and reduce it to understandable parts. On the other hand, many women are "connected" knowers, who make sense of reality by relating new knowledge to experience in the context of relationships. Effective learning environments for connected knowers help them see themselves as creators of knowledge and builders of theory constructed from experience (Hayes 1989). "In experiential learning, the teacher facilitates a process where participants work to translate their experience into theory, and their theories into relevant information for real life exchanges" (Gallos 1992, p. 7).

Other ways to use knowledge of developmental differences to support adult learning include the following: redesigning course content to include other perspectives and using seating arrangements that challenge the teacher's authority role (Tisdell 1993); using teaching methods that are cooperative, democratic, and collaborative, in which learners share power and authority in the teaching process (Hayes 1989); and valuing affective as well as cognitive forms of knowledge and requiring critical reflection on experience and the integration of theory with action.

Caffarella (1992) provides other instructional strategies that are related to the three themes she discerned in the literature on women's development: centrality of relationships, diverse and nonlinear life patterns, and intimacy and identity. These strategies include small group and panel discussions, facilitator demonstration and student practice of behaviors, case studies, role playing, telling one's story, metaphor analysis, critical incident technique, and structured experiences. Also based on this literature are her suggestions of ways to develop women as leaders in the workplace.

Conclusion

The approaches suggested for enhancing women's "different" ways of developing are remarkably similar to principles that are central to adult education: teaching and learning that are collaborative and reflective, social action and social change, validation and use of the life experiences adults bring to the classroom in the teaching/learning process. However, adult educators must "shift their concern from equal accessibility and opportunity to equal outcomes for women" (Collard and Stalker 1991, p. 79), restructuring the learning environment to empower all kinds of learners. For, if the developmental models do not fit all women's lives, there are also men who will not see themselves in these pictures. Caffarella (1992) says, "Women's voices are not just gender related, but also rooted in class, race, age, sexual orientation, and family status" (p. 13). This is also true of men, and all of the voices of difference demonstrate that adult lives are complex and varied. Multiple models that expand the definition of adulthood to include those who have been missing in traditional theories should be developed and used in teaching and counseling. Caffarella concludes that acceptance of a range of voices allows for the ethic of caring as well as the ethic of justice; for valuing of feelings as well as objective data; for interdependence of thought and action to be considered as important as acting autonomously and independently; and for collaborative and cooperative ways of teaching and working to used as often as those of individual direction and action.

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